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*Sung Birds: Music, Nature and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* is a book that hinges on the question, “Is birdsong music?” The author, Elizabeth Eva Leach, centers her argument on whether medieval musicians believed that birds had the ability to rationally understand the sonic components that made up the songs they sang. Although medieval musicians used bird songs extensively for inspiration—which Leach points out in many exhaustive examples—the resounding answer to the question above is “no.” Leach explains in the introduction that her research was motivated by the question: “why [is] such aurally pleasing melody not [considered] music [by] medieval thinkers.” Leach breaks her research into six chapters. With each chapter she furthers her argument that medieval musicians and thinkers did not consider bird song to be music.

The first chapter of this book, entitled “Rational Song,” is partially situated around Pythagoras’s idea of musical intervals and that *musica* is essentially a human activity. Leach uses this as a means by which to introduce some fundamental ideas of medieval understandings of music. Leach’s claim is that because humans are the only creatures capable of rational thought (as presented by medieval treatises), they are the only animal that is capable of producing *musica*. Leach argues that the rational song of the human in opposition to the irrational song of birds is all down to cognitive sophistication. While humans might not have the specific heightened senses of certain animals (“a cock for
sight, a vulture for smell”), we do posses “the rational component of the soul.” Aristotle, upon whom Leach draws frequently, places this above all other animalistic senses. Clearly there are other sounds that are not purely human made, but still considered music. Musica instrumentalis and musica ritmica are the music of instruments, and Leach deals with this too. Using Aristotle’s De Anima (On the Soul), a treatise on the nature of living things, she explains that medieval thinkers believed instruments can make music but cannot be considered to have a voice (vox), as they do not have blood or possess a sense of hearing. Throughout the chapter, Leach provides examples of medieval theorists and composers who were influenced by Aristotle’s work, which describes the vox in regards to music and in comparison with bird song.

Natural and artificial music are treated in chapter two. Entitled “Birdsong and Human Singing”, this chapter presents an in-depth look at the different means of learning the art of musica harmonica (singing). As humans, we are above the bird because we have an understanding about the music. Leach draws upon Cicero, Quintilian, Augustine, Boethius and Hugh of St. Victor to describe the three states of music making as nature, practice, and art. Another important aspect, which puts the human voice above not only birds but also instrumental music, is the use of language. Leach comments, as she does in chapter one, that human singing is more than just precise notes that are learned. Our capacity to “perform language” is an extending factor that allows us to communicate the music better than if it were a bird or an instrument. The final large section of the chapter is dedicated to the differing views on the significance of the nightingale. Treatises by Guido of Arezzo, Augustine (who differ in view) and Arnulf of St. Ghislain, and many others, aid in Leach’s discussion of the nightingale in medieval literature.

At the midway point in this book, Leach reaches the heart of the topic at hand. At the outset of the chapter three, we are asked to think about whether the music that resembles bird songs is employed simply to raise a smile for the audience, or perhaps because of a deeper meaning. Leach uses the bulk of this chapter to provide textual examples of bird song within medieval music. Using actual photos of original manuscripts, Leach’s deductions are well supported. With these examples (one notably by Jacob Senleches, a composer and harpist of the Middle Ages) she shows how the composer identified the nightingale as a prominent singer. The nightingale sings the melody with a steady rhythm and the cuckoo, with the underlying part, is either always slightly behind or ahead. Leach says this emphasizes the loud “dullness” of the cuckoo verses, versus the correct straight rhythm of the nightingale. Her point here is that, even among birds, there are “good” and “bad” singers. With Leach’s examples, it was clear to see that composers
identified the nightingale as an inspirational singer. Leach compares other birds too, but her conclusion from chapter one, that birdsong is not actually music, does not change.

In chapter four, Leach leaves birds for a while and looks into other animals that are not nor have ever been admired for their musical talents. In what seems a bizarre turn, the author chooses to discuss dogs and other hunting animals. While her new tack does seem out of left field, her musical examples begin to make sense in the context of this book. Leach explains this using a song composed by Denis le Gant, which begins in a natural form and is a simple love song. In the middle, however, the hunt ensues in the form of a hocket. This musical technique, Leach says, depicts the cries and different sounds of the hunt. Her point in this chapter is that although the bird (or other animal) may not be musically inspiring, it does fulfill a strong purpose in its owner’s mind, be it falcon or dog for hunting, and therefore is still worthy of song. Once again, however, Leach reinforces her point, that the sounds emitted by these animals did not constitute the auspicious title of music.

Chapter five is somewhat of a small extension of chapter three, insofar as Leach returns to a discussion of the cuckoo and nightingale. The issue at hand in this chapter, however, is the immorality that was assigned to female birds. The topic seems somewhat odd to a twenty-first century person, as the theories discussed say that femininity is just another form of irrationality. Leach’s examples in this chapter are in the form of poetry and treatises rather than in the form of music. Her point is that the idea of feminine immorality or irrationality is more of a stereotype than a musical feature.

Finally, Leach restates her argument in its entirety in chapter six. Throughout this well organized final chapter, Leach covers her important points to round the book off well and does not further her original argument. This chapter leaves the reader at a point where they understand the ideas put forth in the bulk of the book. Following the last chapter is an appendix and bibliography. The appendix is a useful resource while reading the book because Leach better explains her musical examples in this section.

Sung Birds is a challenging but enjoyable read that covers a subject about which not much has been written. Leach makes her issues clear in the introduction and the subsequent introductory paragraphs of each chapter. The book also flows nicely from one chapter to another. Each concluding section leads almost seamlessly into the next, perhaps with the exception of three to four, where the subject change was surprising. Leach provides a plethora of pertinent proof in the way of musical excerpts, poetry, theorist’s treatises and her own wealth of knowledge. This was an interesting and thought provoking read.